GWAC: Today’s Go-To Contract Vehicle

More than ever before, agencies need fast, reasonably priced IT products and services to address continually changing mission requirements. More often than not, they are turning to one of several increasingly popular Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts (GWACs).

During the past 25 years, agencies have relied on GWACs to procure technology and services quickly and effectively. These pre-competed contracts are designed to be easy to use and cost-effective, providing agencies with the IT products and services they need quickly.

The majority of Governmentwide Acquisition Vehicles are managed by three agencies: the General Services Administration (GSA), the National Institute of Health (NIH), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). In general, the contract access fees for GWACs are lower than GSA Schedules or other types of contract vehicles.

Over the past several years, GWACs have become more popular as agency-specific contracts have lost steam. According to Deltek, agency-specific contracts now represent 20 percent of government IT dollars, as opposed to 42 percent in FY2015. At the same time, GWACs have grown from 12 percent of the spend in 2015 to 20 percent in FY19.

Cost and convenience are two very good reasons why GWACs have grown in popularity, says Keith Johnson, a veteran contracting officer currently working with the NITAAC group of GWACs.

“GWACs are very expensive to establish, but the GWAC holders incur those expenses. That means that agencies don’t have to spend the money and time of going through a complex and expensive procurement process,” he says. In addition, GWACs leverage agency buying power across the government, resulting in lower ceiling rates or prices compared to agency-specific contracts, he adds.

The best of the best
One way some GWACs distinguish themselves from others is through a Best-in-Class designation. Contracts designated as BIC by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) meet rigorous category management performance criteria as defined by OMB. According to the NIH Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center (NITAAC), acquisition professionals can confidently use and recommend BIC solutions, knowing they have undergone thorough vetting processes.

One example of an increasingly successful BIC contract is Chief Information Officer-Commodities and Solutions (CIO-CS), a ten-year multiple-award IDIQ GWAC providing IT commodities including hardware, software, compute infrastructure, storage, Platform as a Service (PaaS) and telecommunications. CIO-CS is a mandatory BIC governmentwide solution for desktops and laptops.

As agencies become more familiar with the benefits of CIO-CS, more agencies have embraced it. According to Deltek, agencies spent a total of $765 million on CIO-CS in FY2019, about double what they spent during the previous year. One reason for the increase, according to Deltek, may be the reduction in contract access fee to .35 percent, one of the lowest of all GWACs.

When it comes to flexibility, the CIO-CS contract is in a class of its own, says Sheryl McCurnin, senior manager for federal programs at CDW•G. CDW•G is the largest CIO-CS contractor and has been involved with the contract and its previous iterations since 2002.

“The contract is so flexible. It allows for various contract types with the exception of cost-reimbursable. It allows for time and materials, firm fixed price, and fixed price level of effort. That by itself gives agencies the flexibility to manage their budgets easily without having to go to several different contracts,” she says. “Everything COTS is allowable. It’s the most flexible, resilient GWAC contract available.”

Year over year, GWACs continue to dominate, and there are clearly plenty of reasons why.

“GWACs are a critical component of category management, which was established to drive savings and efficiency, eliminate contract redundancies and increase small business participation,” says Deniece Peterson, Deltek’s director of federal market analysis. “Federal agencies are motivated to reduce costs and support small business solvency which, given the economic and business environment that we’ll be dealing with for years to come due to COVID-19, is even more critical now than it was when they began.”
For Agencies, It’s Time to Rethink Mobility

In 2020, it’s hard to believe that some federal agencies still rely solely on desktop computers. One agency, for example, had its work cut out for them when the pandemic hit, forcing hundreds of employees to quickly find ways to work while away from the office. The agency put some stopgap measures in place, such as allowing employees to temporarily use their own PCs at home for work purposes or scheduling a time to come to the office once every few weeks. The agency is now considering implementing a mobile platform for its employees.

For this agency, it’s probably too little, too late — at least for this emergency. While this is an extreme example, it highlights the growing importance of providing federal employees with the tools and surrounding policies to work from places other than the office.

Most agencies are a bit further along in embracing mobility. They have plenty of support from oversight bodies like GAO and from the General Services Administration. Support in specific agencies ranges from fully supportive to non-supportive.

In general, agencies with existing BYOD policies are in better shape than others. These agencies were able to adapt to the increased requirements for mobility brought on by the pandemic. That’s because those agencies already had policies in place, along with effective security for end-user devices.

Agencies that furnish their employees with mobile devices also are in decent shape, with some caveats. These agencies tend to have mature policies and processes in place, but the devices some employees are using are a few generations old. When that happens, it’s often difficult to secure the devices. In some cases, older devices also don’t have the bandwidth capacity or the ability to enable agencywide Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) to get work done, says Marty Spain, a senior professional services manager with CDW•G.

Getting up to speed with mobile

The first and most important step in helping employees work while away from the office has nothing to do with technology. It’s about policies, mindset, and the willingness to change the way things are done. While these are typically difficult hurdles to overcome, the past few months have helped many agencies see the benefits in changing policies related to mobile technology.

The next step is ensuring that employees have access to modern mobile devices, either furnished by the agency or provided by the employee. Those devices must have effective endpoint security and controls, managed by the agency. “We were surprised at how many agencies requested our assistance because they are still configuring and managing devices manually,” Spain says. Working with CDW•G, a Commercial Solutions for Classified (CSfC) certified company, will ensure agencies implement the proper security capabilities to protect their telework workforce.

Another common challenge revolves around bandwidth and connectivity. Not every employee lives in an urban area with ubiquitous connectivity, but connectivity is crucial to productivity.

The 2020 Census is a good example. Because everybody residing in the United States must respond, the bureau sends workers out on foot to follow up with people who have not responded. Census-takers are working throughout the country, often in places without good carrier services or internet access. To solve the problem, the Census Bureau worked with CDW•G to procure 500,000 mobile devices under the CIO-CS contract and CDW•G was able to solve for the complex carrier and access issues Nationwide.

The CIO-CS contract is an ideal vehicle to help agencies shore up their mobility plans, including devices and infrastructure. It’s also a good way to enable federal employees to remotely access tools and data on classified networks — one of the most difficult challenges agencies are facing in the current environment. CIO-CS is an ideal vehicle for agencies to get solutions approved for CSfC (Commercial Solutions for Classified), Spain says.

“Through CIO-CS, agencies have access to our engineers to help them fix current issues or implement new solutions,” Spain says. “We work with so many agencies on so many projects that we have a lot of lessons learned we can apply to our customers.”
In fiscal year 2020, 42 percent of federal employees were eligible to telework. Despite reports that agencies continue to make progress in using telework to support mission goals, relatively few agencies and employees truly embraced it — until recently. In a short span of time, agencies have been forced to allow virtually all employees to telework, at least temporarily. Today, agencies are reporting that upward of 90 percent of employees are working remotely.

Some agencies have been more ready than others for the onslaught. “In most cases, agencies were prepared to an extent, but not for people to work remotely for so long,” said Brett Schambow, a sales director at CDW•G focusing on the DoD. “We’re finding that most were doing well with laptops, desktops, displays and other hardware for employees to work from home. On the other hand, some were less prepared to deal with the challenges of bandwidth and secure access.”

Those functions — adequate bandwidth and secure access — are critical components for effective, safe work from home. Without them, everything is harder, from collaboration to efficiency to application access.

Bandwidth issues can affect not only the internet connection itself, but the speed with which employees can access information. It’s important to address these issues at both ends — at the end user and at the agency, says Patrick Porter, a business development professional at CDW•G. Agencies should perform some capacity modeling or analysis to determine what they need to handle the inevitable bottlenecks that will occur when supporting a larger, concurrent user base.

For end users, one of the best ways to address bandwidth problems is by upgrading employee access with enterprise-grade wireless technology. In addition to enabling employees to more efficiently use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access agency networks, it will bode well for the future, he says. “The right technology allows for more social distancing within and around federal buildings as they start to open up,” Porter says. “It will allow people to potentially sit outside in courtyards and around facilities and keep social distancing intact.”

Security is the other challenge. There is plenty of guidance to help agencies manage security in the era of telework, but it boils down to focusing on two major areas: the network and end-user devices. On the network side, it’s about securing networks in ways that take into account the vast numbers of users remotely accessing them. Securing end-user devices at this volume is equally important, and it is testing the limits for many agencies.

In the network arena, another important consideration for remote work is network capacity. That includes capacity planning, updating bandwidth, and rearchitecting many of the core components within the data center to optimize how systems are communicating internally.

Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) also is becoming a popular option for remote work. Not only is it efficient with bandwidth versus traditional VPNs, but agencies have full control over what employees can access or do.

It’s not all about hardware and infrastructure, however. Full-scale telework requires upgraded collaboration tools. One large agency with worldwide locations, for example, found that it couldn’t provide its employees with the ability to communicate with each another outside the network. Working with CDW•G the agency implemented Microsoft Teams, a collaboration hub for Microsoft 365. When it proved successful, the agency decided to expand the implementation.

While these changes may be painful, they are necessary, and many agencies are making the best of the situation by upgrading their remote work infrastructure. “This is, to a certain extent, a new norm,” Schambow says. “It’s an opportunity for agencies to take a really hard look and prepare for the inevitable future.”
Spotlight: CIO-CS

CIO-CS is one of three major GWACs under the NITAAC (NIH Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center) umbrella. The Best in Class IDIQ GWAC, which focuses on IT commodities, just entered its second five-year period of performance. Keith Johnson, contracting officer for all NITAAC GWACs, explains what’s special about CIO-CS.

**How is CIO-CS different from other GWACs?**

JOHNSON: First, it’s important to understand that it’s not a competition. NITAAC is a lot smaller in general, which allows us to be very flexible and nimble. For example, our goal is to respond to any inquiry within one hour. Customer service is not something we take for granted. As a contracting officer, I know how frustrating it is to see your acquisitions stall, so I stress to our team to make sure we are as responsive as possible so our customers can meet their IT mission-critical needs. As for flexibility, we guarantee that any request to add new products will be reviewed within 24 hours, but most TRPs (technical refresh program) are reviewed and approved to the CIO-CS Catalog within an hour of submission.

**What advantages do agencies have by using CIO-CS?**

JOHNSON: Because it was chosen as a Governmentwide Strategic Solutions (GSS) for laptops and desktops, agencies can quickly get these items with a few clicks. We have seen agencies taking advantage of that feature more over time. Another relatively new strategic sourcing initiative is Agency EPIC (Enterprise Portfolio IT Category), which allows agencies to set up their own strategic source contracts against CIO-CS. We have set it up so users can “see” the products, compare them, and order them all in a portal designed to be similar to those of large online retailers. It’s relatively new, but we’re seeing it grow in popularity quickly.

**How can agencies get started with CIO-CS?**

JOHNSON: They just go online and register, and then they can start using our Electronic Government Ordering System (e-GOS) for streamlined ordering. e-GOS allows agencies to quickly upload specifications, requirements and supporting documentation and select awardees. They can post it and contract-holders submit their quotes via the system so the contracting officer isn’t getting bombarded with emails. Then the contracting officer does the evaluation and uploads the award to the system. The system records everything: dollar amount, contract access fee, etc. I’m pleased to announce that NITAAC e-GOS system was most recently ranked the “most liked system” among federal procurement systems.

**CIO-CS By the Numbers**

$765 million: The amount agencies spent on CIO-CS in FY2019 (Source: Deltek)

205%: The amount by which annual spending on CIO-CS has grown from FY 2016-FY2019 (Source: Bloomberg Government)

12,144: Number of orders through June 1, 2020 (Source: NITAAC)

$2.16 billion: Amount in sales since FY2015 (Source: NITAAC)

.35%: NIH Contract Access Fee (NCAF), capped at $70,000

$20 billion: Program Ceiling 2025: Year the current CIO-CS contract ends (April 30th)

**Have you noticed any changes in customer requirements or NITAAC response during the pandemic?**

JOHNSON: We’ve gotten a lot of questions from agencies about how to navigate the system and how quickly they can get to an award. And I’m pleased to say that our agency customers and our contract holders have not noticed a difference during this time. We continue to respond to inquiries at our customer support center within the hour in most cases. And we are anticipating a significant increase in usage as the fourth quarter approaches, perhaps in response to the pandemic.
Remote Work: The New Normal?

If the challenges of the past few months have taught the federal agencies anything, it's that remote work can work for the long term. COVID-19 has forced federal employees, as well as many of their private sector counterparts, to perform most or all of their tasks from their homes, either with agency-provided hardware and networking or using their own tools.

Even though the current pandemic is forcing agencies to re-examine their priorities, policies and technologies, it actually has a very real precedent in the events of 9/11. During that time, the interest in telework spiked. Congress responded with a committee hearing on The Heightened Need for Telework Opportunities in the Post-9/11 World, where Congressman Tom Davis said that "telework should be an essential component of any continuity of operations plan". The focus on telework continued with the Telework Enhancement Act of 2000, which required agencies to focus on opportunities for telework.

While those events helped familiarize many with the idea of remote work, it hadn't taken off as many had hoped—until now. Today, virtually everybody is teleworking, and many say that business won't revert back to usual, at least completely. Today, agencies and their employees have become used to the idea and know that it can work. In addition, today's technologies make remote work efficient and safe. If deployed widely, it could allow agencies to save money on office space and improve employee satisfaction.

In fact, research has proven that remote work yields great benefits. According to the 2018 Federal Work-Life Survey Report, 72 percent of employees said telework improved performance, 76 percent said it increased the desire to remain at their current agency, and 83 percent said it improved morale. In addition, 67 percent said it minimized distractions, while 64 percent said it improved productivity.

Permanent telework is a real option

In early May, Twitter announced that it would allow some employees to work from home permanently, and other large companies are following suit. A Gartner survey conducted in March found that 74 percent of organizations plan to move at least 5 percent of their previously onsite workforce to permanent remote status after the pandemic.

These numbers will clearly make many employees happy. A Gallup poll in April found that three out of five U.S. employees who have been teleworking during the pandemic would prefer to continue working remotely after the crisis.

So why shouldn't federal agencies adopt the same philosophy?

Anecdotal evidence indicates that some of them will. The Social Security Administration, for example, is under pressure from the American Federation of Government Employees, the largest federal employee union, to continue remote work. In fact, federal unions in general are pushing for governmentwide telework. The Defense Department also is reportedly considering permanent teleworking for some Pentagon employees.

Of course, any move like this requires serious consideration of policy and technical roadblocks. Some of the most important include cybersecurity, compliance, collaboration and consistent access. But with today's technology, it's more than possible. The non-profit RAND Corp. advises that federal agencies think carefully about what functions can and can't be performed remotely, while keeping an open mind. For those functions that make sense, provide appropriate infrastructure supports, train employees on tools and policies, and keep the lines of communication open. By taking this advice, RAND analysts say that agencies may be able to avoid pitfalls and problems early, gain more output and better outcomes from their employees during the crisis, and emerge with a more flexible, more capable, and more resilient workforce than before.
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